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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the benefit of nursery rhymes in literacy acquisition. It begins by discussing the history and attribution of various rhymes and the linkage of nursery rhymes with Mother Goose. It then suggests literacy advantages of children who know nursery rhymes over children who do not, which include the abilities to: (1) learn the intonation patterns of a language; (2) learn new words and concepts; (3) understand the basis of learning to read and write; and (4) appreciate poetry. The paper concludes that exploring rhymes in games, poetry and songs are enjoyable ways to provide knowledge and skills that can later help children become successful readers and writers. (Contains 16 references.) (EF)

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The Importance of Nursery Rhymes

By Dr. Elaine Danielson

Introduction.

Because he does not read for enjoyment as much as I wish he would or think he should, Thomas, my youngest son, claims that it is because I didn't read to him when he was growing up. I, of course, deny this. However, his older brother, James, has Down's Syndrome and since James didn't walk until he was 26 months old, we spent many hours sitting, reading picture books and reciting nursery rhymes. I could have "burned out" when Thomas came along five years later because he claims that, for one thing, he did not know many nursery rhymes when he entered kindergarten. That is NOT good since research seems to suggest that one of the best indicators of how well children will learn to read is their ability to recite nursery rhymes when they walk into kindergarten (Cunningham, 1991). Both boys did learn to read and write, but I always felt remiss about depriving Thomas of his nursery rhyme heritage. So, the purpose of this article is to determine what makes nursery rhymes so beneficial in literacy acquisition.

History of Nursery Rhymes.

First a bit about the history of nursery rhymes. Nursery rhymes are verses customarily told or sung to small children. The oral tradition of nursery rhymes is ancient, but new verses have steadily been added through the years. A French poem, numbering the days of the month similar to "Thirty days hath September," was recorded in the 13th century; but such late comers as Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star"(1806) and "Mary Had a Little

Lamb" (1830) seem to be just as important and highly valued as the earlier ones. Most nursery rhymes date from the 16th, 17th and most frequently, the 18th centuries (Britannica.com Inc. 1999-2000). Apparently, most were originally composed for adult entertainment and were popular ballads and songs. This is hard to believe because nursery rhymes are often nonsensical. However, many of these songs and rhymes were sung in taverns and often in rounds, so when the men had too much to drink, their words became nonsense. (VanderMeer, 1999). There are always exceptions. For example, "Oh where, oh where ish mine little dog gone" did not come out of a tavern, but was a popular song written in 1864 by the Philadelphia composer, Septimus Winner (Britannica.com Inc.1999-2000). At any rate, nursery rhymes have come under attack many times through the years. As early as the seventeenth century, our stern forefathers considered many of these verses unfit for childish ears. Their adult perceptions saw brutality, dishonesty, and irresponsibility rather than silliness and nonsensical fun. In more recent years, harsh criticism has been leveled at the apparent sexism in the verses (Cullinan, 1989) like "The frog who would a wooing go" which first appeared in 1580.

Although many theories have been advanced attributing hidden political significance to nursery rhymes, there is no reason to suppose they were any different than the popular songs of the day. Some were inspired by personalities of the time. For example, "Little Jack Horner" (recorded 1725) was associated with a Thomas Horner, a steward to the Abbot of Glastonbury, during the reign of King Henry VIII. According to legend, the

king wanted more land and the Abbot, hoping to appease the king, sent him a special gift: a pie containing 12 deeds to manor houses in Glastonbury. On his way to London, the not-so- loyal courier, Horner, stuck his thumb into the pie and extracted the deed for Mells Manor, a plum piece of real estate, where his descendants live to this day (Chalmers, 1989). The earliest known published English collection of nursery rhymes was Tommy Thumb's Song Book (London, 1744). It included "Little Tom Tucker," "Sing a Song of Sixpence," and "Who Killed Cock Robin?" The most influential book was Mother's Goose's Melody: or Sonnets for the Cradle published by the firm of John Newbery in 1781. Among its 51 rhymes were "Jack and Jill," "Ding Dong Bell" and Hush a -bye-Baby on the tree top." An edition was reprinted in the United States in 1785 by Isaiah Thomas. Its popularity is attested to by the fact that they are still called Mother Goose rhymes today (Britannica.com. Inc. 1999-2000).

Mother Goose Rhymes

Who is Mother Goose, anyway? Mother Goose was a fictitious old woman, reputed to be the source of the body of traditional children's songs and verses known as nursery rhymes. The term has been traced to a book, La Muse Historique (1650), written by Loret, a Frenchman, in which the sentence "like a Mother Goose story" appeared (Delamar, 1987). In 1697, Charles Perrault used the phrase in a published a collection of eight fairy tales. Although the book was titled Histories and Tales of Long ago, with Morals, the title page showed an old woman spinning and telling stories which bore the

words, "Tales of My Mother the Goose." Perrault, consequently, set the stage for the name to become a household word (Delamar, 1987). Mother Goose is often pictured as a beak-nosed, sharp-chinned, elderly woman riding on the back of a flying gander. The persistent legend that she was an actual Boston woman, Elizabeth Goose, whose grave in Old Granary Burying Grounds is still a tourist attraction, is false. No evidence of the book of rhymes she supposedly wrote in 1719 has ever been found. According to Delamar (1987), author of Mother Goose: From Nursery to Literature, a Mother Goose rhyme is given that label if it meets various criteria. Some say it's the subject matter. Others say it is the patter and rhythm of the verse. Some even say it's the length of the piece. Some insist that the author must be unknown. These arguments are not applied to nursery rhymes in general—only to the traditional verses that commonly are now classified as Mother Goose. From this, it's obvious that there is still confusion about what really constitutes a Mother Goose rhyme and sets them apart from other nursery rhymes. To clarify, Delamar (1987) writes that a nursery rhyme is not necessarily a "Mother Goose" rhyme, but a "Mother Goose" rhyme is a nursery rhyme. Iona and Peter Opie, authors of two definitive works, The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book and The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes have said this about their origin.

> Much ingenuity has been exercised to show that certain nursery rhymes
> Have had greater significance than is now apparent.
> They have been vested with mystic symbolism, linked with
> social and political events, and numerous attempts
> have been made to identify the nursery characters with real persons.

> It should be stated straightway that the bulk of these speculations are worthless. Fortunately, the theories are so numerous they tend to cancel each other out (Opie and Opie, 1951).

Reasons for Reading and Reciting Nursery Rhymes.

What reasons are there for reading and reciting nursery rhymes to young children? It has been found that children who know nursery rhymes have an advantage over those who do not (Myers, 1994). Why is this the case? They appear to help children: (a) learn the intonation patterns of a language (b) learn new words and concepts, (c) understand the basis of learning to read and write, and (d) gain appreciation of poetry.

The rhythm of the language, the compact structure of the narratives, and the engaging characters all combine to produce the perfect model for young children to develop an ear for the music of words, phrases and sentences (Cullinan, 1991). The rhymes help convey the characteristic speech rhythms of the language. There are phrases to chant, nonsense words to mimic and alliterative repetitions to practice. The beat, stress, sound and intonation patterns that establish themselves in memory contribute to mastering the suprasegmental phonemes of a language—pitches, stresses and junctures—that are an important part of being able to communicate effectively.

Some nursery rhymes may have been composed to teach children to count, to learn the alphabet, learn new words, expand their imaginations or to say their prayers. Written text places high demands on vocabulary knowledge. And nursery rhymes can help develop this knowledge because there is much to be gained from the language of the verses. The

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nursery verses not only help to reinforce children's knowledge of speech patterns but also to learn new and vivid words. But they do it in a "fun" way rather than as lessons. This enjoyment helps develop communication and rapport between reader/teller and child. Plus there can be an instant common bond between home and school when familiar nursery rhymes are read or recited by the teacher on the first day of school.

Rhymes repetition can also sensitize children to the individual units of sounds known as phonemes which make up words. An individual's awareness that spoken words consist of sound segments smaller than the syllable is referred to as phonological awareness. That individuals have the ability to rhyme to match beginning sounds are among the ways phonological awareness traditionally has been determined. The ability to break words that are spoken down into sound parts and/or blend the sounds parts into words is necessary to acquire the alphabetic principle. The alphabetic principle means knowing that sound parts are represented by written letters. This enables children to employ a sound-based strategy called phonics (among other reading strategies) when they are attempting to read or write words that they do not know (Cecil, 1999). Children who have difficulty with understanding letter-sound correspondences often have difficulty in reading. Therefore, it is important to work with phonological awareness early so that later the ability to decode may be less difficult. Many aspects of language development are spontaneous and natural, but phonological awareness is not necessarily like that. Many children cannot understand that words are made up of sounds. They may have speech

discrimination, but phonological awareness is not the same as speech discrimination. Speech discrimination is the ability to discriminate the sounds of language, such as being able to tell the difference between *bat* and *hat* or *time* and *tame*. Students having adequate speech discrimination may have difficulty with phonological awareness. Speech discrimination is natural and automatic and does not require abstracting sounds, whereas phonological awareness does (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998).

So, because longer units are easier to perceive than individual speech sounds, a good place to begin to develop phonological awareness is through rhymes which are the easier of the phonological awareness tasks (Yopp, 1988). Reading nursery rhymes and other rhyming tasks help children develop the ability to detect rhyme. In a study conducted in Great Britain, children who knew nursery rhymes were better at detecting rhyme and also did better in early reading than those who had no such knowledge (Maclean, Bryant & Bradley, 1987). At first just reading nursery rhymes so that children enjoy them is enough. Then they can memorize them later if they want to (Gunning, 2000).

Of course, reading and writing depends upon knowledge of print. The use of nursery rhymes can aid in developing concepts of print and can help children become aware of the speech to print match. By reciting a favorite rhyme a few times, followed by printing the rhyme on a chart and rereading it while pointing to each word to preserve the sense of rhyme, reading it together and then having the child read the rhyme helps to make that connection between spoken and written language. Obviously, children are more

successful learning to read if the words of the text are familiar. They are especially motivated to learn if the words are popular and fun like those in nursery rhymes. Kids are aware fairly early that the same set of sounds can have different meanings, but when they begin to read, they can see that different words may be spelled differently. For example,

> "My captain went to sea, sea, sea
> To see what he could see, see, see."

This may seem like a small thing, but children are learning more about literacy than they realize when they are exposed to print in this informal way. It is true that "things that people think are trivial are just the things that are worth taking seriously" (Myers, 1994). Cumulative experiences in hearing nursery rhymes are helpful in improving reading comprehension, as well, and in listening to stories, poems and rhymes, children can develop a positive disposition toward books.

Another thing that nursery rhymes can do is form a legitimate basis upon which to build an appreciation of poetry. Nursery rhymes are among the best-known literature in America and are the first form of poetry that most children experience. Godden (1988) maintains that children should be introduced to poetry through nursery rhymes because nursery rhymes are true poems, poetry, with all its gifts of language rhythm and unexpectedness" (p. 309). Poet Walter De la Mare attests to their importance. Mother Goose rhymes, he declares,

> Free the fancy, charm the tongue and ear, delight the inward eye
> And many of them are tiny masterpieces of word craftsmanship....Last but not least, they are not only crammed with vivid little scenes and objects and living creatures, but, however fantastic and nonsensical they may be, they are a direct short cut into poetry itself (De la Mare, 1983).

An appreciation for Mother Goose rhymes can also form a basis for the writing of one's own poetry (Myers, 1994).

Nursery rhymes have come up in the world. There is now a recognized Mother Goose Day celebrated on May 1st in the United States. It was founded by Gloria Delamar in 1987 in tandem with the publication of her book, Mother Goose: From Nursery to Literature. Exploring rhymes in games, poetry and songs is an enjoyable way to provide knowledge and skills that can later help children become successful readers and writers. Nursery rhymes provide a means for children to read words effortlessly and accurately they have heard and seen many times. What a powerful and fun way to begin a literacy quest.

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